



National parks wrestle with the basic question of how to preserve nature when nature is inherently dynamic. In the 1980s, the National Park Service began a controversial program of controlled burns in groves of giant sequoia trees in Sequoia–Kings Canyon National Park (California). The program was based on scientific evidence that periodic, non-lethal fires are necessary for the trees to reproduce and be healthy.





Controlled burning in national parks may involve allowing naturally caused wildfires (such as those started by lightning) to burn, so long as certain conditions are met. Another method is setting fires intentionally (often called “prescribed burning”) is now a common resource management technique in the national park system: (above) Lake Meredith National Recreation Area (Texas); (right) Herbert Hoover National Historic Site (Iowa).



Because of this “natural fire” policy, large areas of Yellowstone National Park (Wyoming / Idaho / Montana) were allowed to burn in 1988 — generating enormous controversy, but no permanent damage. Today, lodgepole pine forests in the park are growing again.





The best-known geological formation at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore (Michigan), called Miners Castle, changed forever in April 2006 when the northeastern “turret” collapsed into Lake Superior as the result of centuries of wind and wave action.





The 1915 eruption of Lassen Peak in California led to the area around it being proclaimed Lassen Volcanic National Park by Congress a year later.





An even bigger eruption had occurred in 1912, but it was in remote southwestern Alaska so less attention was paid to it. But when National Geographic Society scientists visited in 1916, they were so impressed that they got President Wilson to proclaim it Katmai National Monument (now called Katmai National Park and Preserve). This recent photo of Mount Martin shows that the park is still an active volcanic area.





Eruptions are routine even today at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (Hawai'i), creating lava flows that challenge hikers.





The Park Service now adheres to management policies that try to minimize human interventions with wildlife. It wasn't always so. During the 1930s, one of Sequoia National Park's most popular visitor attractions was the daily feeding of bears at a dump in Giant Forest.





The pace of ecological change in national parks is sometimes readable in the landscape. At Cape Krusenstern National Monument (Alaska), 114 parallel beach ridges can be readily seen from the air, each marking the location of a shoreline that has repeatedly receded over thousands of years.





Today, climate change is the biggest threat to the integrity of the national parks. Muir Glacier in Glacier Bay National Park (Alaska) has shrunk by more than 30 miles since 1892.